

Narrator:

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The Freedom Writers Diary is a testament to the power of writing. It's the story of a remarkable woman named Erin Gruwell, a high school English teacher from Woodrow Wilson High School in the city of Long Beach, in California. The Freedom Writers Diary has become a best-seller, the basis for a feature film, and an inspiration to teachers everywhere.

The book itself is a true story of hope and change. It is made up of journals that Gruwell told her students to write in about the troubles of their past, present and future. Many of these students had experienced violence, the death of close friends, racism and stereotypes that reinforced negative perceptions. But by studying the experiences of others — through the reading of books such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo* — these students from some of the toughest neighborhoods, who had been labeled as “unteachable” and “below average,” were transformed and discovered that they had enormous power to promote peace within and around themselves. As Erin Gruwell herself explains, the Freedom Writers are truly a special group of students.

Erin Gruwell:

I began teaching in 1994. I had 150 students at that point who were freshmen. In the city they lived in there was 126 murders; this was in Long Beach, California. And there was an incident of intolerance that made me juxtapose what was happening on the streets with these 126 murders and this idea of man's inhumanity, and I used the Holocaust at that point to parallel where they were and where they were headed. None of my students has heard of the Holocaust so that was the next avenue: contacted some Holocaust survivors; took my students to the museum of tolerance, and it started this incredible odyssey. The idea was how can you put down your fist, how can you put down that gun and how do you pick up a pen and write — write your story, write the obituary of the friend that you lost, write the legacy. And so we did this letter campaign where we would write letters to people that we had either read about or were fascinated about, invited them to come and be our teachers. And so our first successful coup was we wrote to the woman who saved Anne Frank, Miep Gies. She was 87 at the time, living in Amsterdam, sent it off like a message in a bottle. And she came. I think that was the first moment that they realized the power of writing and the power of geography and that we have something to say. We wrote to Zlota Filipovic, who had written *Zlota's Diary*, and what was fascinating about Zlota at the time was they were the exact same age and there was a parallel between the first bloodshed in Sarajevo and the Los Angeles riots. Both were around the same time and they were the exact same age, and the same age at that time of when Anne Frank has passed away. And I stayed with these students for four years — their freshman year through their senior year — and they became these ambassadors of tolerance. So we started getting e-mails from all around the country from teachers saying, “I used this book; it has changed the way I teach. It has changed the way my students approach education. They want to learn more about civil rights, they want to learn more about the Holocaust, they want to know about Rwanda, Cambodia, genocides across the globe, they want to do an initiative

for the Sudan.” When Zlota Filipovic came to our classroom, I told my kids, “Your lives will never be the same,” and they haven’t. And it was because we had those substantive opportunities to see the Schindler’s list and to make it a part of their lives, so when the bell rang and they went home for the day, it was still in their minds. So when they watched Vlade Divac and Tony Kukoc, they said ok, they could sit down with all of their basketball buddies who are gangsters and talk about – ok, Vlade’s a Serb, and Tony’s a Croat, and they were on the international team in Yugoslavia, and then there’s this war, and to hear these 14-, 15-year-old bad-ass gangsters deconstructing what happened in Yugoslavia and talking about Tito in terms of basketball, and then to have my students say we need to do — we need to send reparations to Bosnia and they had this basketball tournament for Bosnia, and they sent things over because that was concrete for them, they could play hoops on the weekend but then they understood this war.

Narrator:

Today, the Freedom Writers Diary has been translated into nine languages, and the Freedom Writers themselves have traveled around the world to share their experience. Teachers have been inspired by the Freedom Writers to share their own stories about the power of tolerance in communities in Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

The Freedom Writers Diary has been criticized by many people. But despite attempts to ban the book, and in some cases to remove teachers who used the book in class, it has set a powerful example for teachers and students in some of the world’s most displaced communities. Gruwell and her students continue to seek ways to bring their message of tolerance to young people outside the United States.

Erin Gruwell:

I took almost 80 of them when we went abroad the first time, when we did Poland, Bosnia, Croatia and the Netherlands. How do we continue to take this message abroad, and since these young people are such great ambassadors, how can we go to places in the Balkans and continue to make a difference? And so we had our first opportunity to train an international teacher from Taiwan this year who has these aspirations of going back and starting an aboriginal school for the displaced folks from Taiwan. But the requests have really grown. We’ve gotten requests to do things in South Africa and Australia, to go back to some of the Asian countries. You know, I really want to go to some of those areas where we could bring in Palestinian kids and Israeli kids, or what we did at the University of Sarajevo years ago and bring in kids from Kosovo, and we had this great poly-ethnic group of kids trying to understand what had happened and them giving us books like *The Key to My Neighbor’s House* or *Love Thy Neighbor* about genocides and for us to go back and read those books and really try to understand what happened here and what we represented as Americans. Long Beach is the largest Cambodian population outside of Cambodia. For my Asian students, they were mostly either Laotian or Cambodian. And so it really brought the message home to us and it made my students go home and ask their parents who was Pol Pot; what were those killing fields; why are we here. And I think up until that moment, my students who were born in those refugee camps never asked those questions. And so we have great ambassadors who I’d love to take with us because it was a story about understanding. We have students from Nicaragua

who went back and asked their parents what was that civil war about; students from El Salvador. And so what I loved about the Freedom Writers is that it's so incredibly multicultural and so diverse. What we've found is this universality of the human spirit and these kids regardless of where we've been able to make an impact, the stories are the same, and so when we were in France, we worked with the kids in the 19th district, which were predominantly Muslim students, and they identified. When we were in Taiwan, we worked with some of the aboriginal kids and they identified, and so everywhere we've gone, we've tried to really work with the displaced young people of that community and have those tough discussions. In a perfect world, we'd like to start bringing teachers to our international training groups. But also when we go to these countries to make that, what we're doing isn't just parachuting in and parachuting out. We're coming for a reason and a purpose, and when we leave, this becomes part of your curriculum or a part of your school. And so what we can do on our end, if we have the interest in the communities that we go; we haven't had the opportunity yet to go to Israel, but I've always said that I think this book would be amazing in Israel, and we just haven't been able to get a Hebrew translation but I'm going to fight that, that battle, I really think it would do incredibly well there.

You can find more information on the Freedom Writers, the Freedom Writers Diary, and teacher training programs online at www.freedomwritersfoundation.org.

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